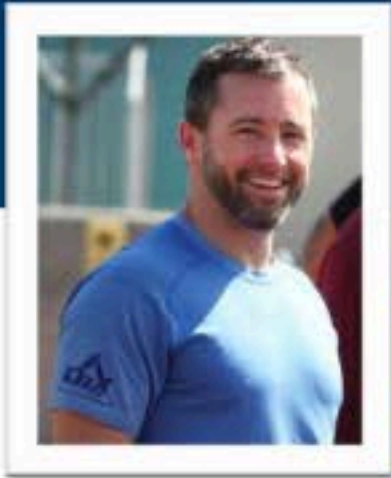


# No Off-Season: Training LEOs for Performance and Longevity

By Adam La Reau



**A**s tactical athletes, law enforcement officers face heightened levels of mental and physical stress daily. And, if not addressed properly, the effects of those stressors can accumulate

over time and negatively impact the health and wellness of the force. However, if given the proper tools and resources, individuals and departments can implement small, incremental changes that will lead to major lifestyle improvements, so officers can finish their careers as strong as they started.

Comprehensive training programs for tactical athletes should include all aspects of human performance: nutrition, conditioning, sleep, stress management, and resilience. Another key component to effective training is maintaining a focus on performance beyond general fitness. The final piece of a complete program for tactical athletes is a focus on preventative methods for mitigating stress and lowering the potential for injury and job-related health issues.

The physically and mentally demanding nature of law enforcement puts officers at risk of cardiac-related events, disordered sleep patterns, occupational injuries, and behavioral health issues. It is imperative that department leaders implement programs to mitigate these risks and cultivate culture change so officers can stay healthy and keep their communities safe. The most notable areas of improvement for law enforcement are in cardiac health, injury prevention, and developing sleep hygiene techniques.

Nearly 10% of all law enforcement deaths that occur on-duty are the result of sudden cardiac events (Varvarigou et al., 2014, p. 3). And, according to the Harvard School of Public Health, the risk of sudden cardiac death is 30 to 70 times higher when officers are involved in stressful situations than in non-emergency scenarios (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2014). These numbers signify a need to improve the physical health of the force

and highlight the importance of training for job-specific performance.

Tactical athletes respond at a moment's notice with no time to spare. Research notes that the rate of cardiac events in officers is likely the result of the combination of physical demands and psychological stress when responding to calls - triggering "fight or flight" response (Varvarigou et al., 2014, p. 4). This transition from being relatively sedentary either in a patrol car or sitting at a desk to jumping into action requires being in top physical condition and building mental readiness.



Periodization is a fundamental process that guides methodical development of energy systems and strength gains during training cycles (Rhea & Alderman, 2004). Following a conditioning program focused on systematically developing these systems will create a foundation of fitness to help mitigate the risk of cardiac events. This enables tactical athletes to improve strength and fitness over time without causing burnout or overtraining. By creating a strong base of aerobic endurance and overall strength, tactical athletes can add anaerobic capacity, speed, and explosive power.

In addition to conditioning, proper nutrition is a critical component to cardiovascular health and readiness to respond when called to action. As the saying goes, "you can't outrun a bad diet" (American Heart Association, 2015). For tactical athletes, this can make the difference between success and failure of a response. Maintaining blood sugar stabilization enables tactical athletes to

# No Off-Season...con't.

sustain energy levels throughout a shift and avoid fatigue so they are ready for any call.

The unpredictable nature of a shift makes proper nutrition and hydration mission critical for tactical athletes. O2X Human Performance experts teach tactical athletes how the quality, quantity, and timing of meals impacts overall health, mental acuity, and will help them maximize performance throughout their careers. Making small, incremental changes and improving nutrition and hydration habits along with physical conditioning will decrease risk of cardiac health issues within the force.

Along with the cardiac health risks, law enforcement officers also face heightened levels of nonfatal occupational injuries compared to all other professions. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 485 per 10,000 officers incurred injuries or illness resulting in time off, while other occupations had 107 cases per 10,000 people (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Given this statistic and due to the physical nature of law enforcement, it is clear that tactical athletes must focus on injury prevention techniques.

Injury prevention, sometimes called prehabilitation (prehab), should focus on known areas of potential weakness such as back injuries, strains, sprains, and fractures. An effective prehab program is one that is done consistently, and is meant to prepare joints, muscles, and tissues for potential stress they may be placed under in future situations. In tactical populations, prehab routines and dynamic warm ups can be implemented as part of a daily training program.

O2X Human Performance experts recommend beginning any workout with a warm up that includes five minutes of movement to get blood flowing, followed by dynamic exercises that target areas of the body that will be used during the given training session. Additionally, daily prehab routines can include movements that target any area used frequently in job-related tasks. For tactical

athletes, this would include movements that focus on glute and hip, core, and shoulder and back activation. What is most important is that the routine is done consistently and is short enough that there is no excuse to skip it. In the long run, giving officers the tools they need to implement a prehab routine will mitigate costs associated with injury and ensure officers have long, healthy careers.

Although not often discussed when it comes to training programs, developing healthy sleep habits can have a big impact on the mental and physical well-being of tactical athletes. According to a Harvard Medical study, 40% of active-duty officers reported symptoms of one or more sleep abnormalities, which increase vulnerability to health risks like depression, obesity, heart disease, and diabetes (Rajartnam, Barger, & Lockley, 2011). By developing healthy sleep habits, officers can not only diminish the risk of cardiovascular disease but also mitigate stress and enhance mental focus on the job.

Like nutrition, getting quality rest by developing healthy sleep habits plays a big role in optimizing performance and overall health. O2X Human Performance experts teach tactical athletes how adequate sleep improves mood, increases the body's ability to facilitate muscle and tissue recovery, and strengthens memory. Providing officers with resources about how to develop pre-sleep routines, limit exposure to screens and electronics before bed, and utilize relaxation techniques to induce restful sleep is crucial to their health and job-performance. Focusing on recovery through healthy sleep habits will limit risk of physical injury, help officers build resilience, and improve mental performance to better handle job-related stressors.

Tactical athletes face heightened levels of mental and physical stress daily. This requires that they are not only in top physical condition, but also mentally strong and ready to handle the most stressful situations. Given the health risks that accompany the job, law enforcement officers must train hard so they can answer any call. It is

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imperative that leaders provide their departments with comprehensive, science-backed training and education on all areas of human performance, so officers can keep their communities safe and finish their careers as strong as they started.

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## About the Author

Adam La Reau is co-founder of O2X Human Performance and leads operations and curriculum development for the company. O2X Human Performance provides comprehensive, science-backed training and education so tactical athletes can finish their careers as strong as they started. A former Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy, La Reau began as a Midshipman at the United States Merchant Marine Academy. He was the first USMMA Midshipman to report directly to, and successfully complete, the U.S. Navy's BUD/SEAL training. After 10 years with the East Coast based SEAL Teams, Adam left active duty in 2013. He holds an MPA from Harvard Kennedy School of Government and created One Summit, a non-profit to help children with cancer build resilience.

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